

Remarkable, ancient crane breed graces Black Creek

Birding enthusiasts in Campbell River and the Comox Valley were abuzz last weekend over the rare appearance of Sandhill Cranes in a Black Creek farm field. Word went out on the 'feather and beak' telegraph on Friday, June 23 that not one, but two cranes had been seen, and they were actually dancing. Great leaping birds!

Naturalists flocked to see the huge feathered creatures, and several sightings were confirmed. It is believed to be the first-ever summer appearance of Sandhill Cranes in either Campbell River, Black Creek or the Comox Valley.

The Sandhill Crane (*Grus canadensis*), is an enormous, tall and stately bird. Adults are gray with a bald red skin patch on the crown. Plumage sometimes appears rusty-brown because of iron stains from water of tundra ponds. With a long neck, a long, heavy bill and yellow eyes, they're also long-legged and knock-kneed. They are three-feet tall, and can reach four-feet in length, with a wingspan of 90-inches! Their flight speed has been recorded at up to 50 mph and they cruise at a dizzying altitude of 1,640 feet.

The recent sightings were remarkable on many fronts: Sandhill Cranes are seen here only during spring or fall migration - and then only rarely. The Checklist of Campbell River Birds lists them as an 'accidental, uncommon migrant'. The fact that the two cranes might be a mating pair led some to think they may have been looking to set up housekeeping in the wilds of Black Creek.

Think 'pre-historic'. The Sandhill Crane is one of the oldest living species of birds, dating back 2.5 million years. In some parts of North America, it is an endangered species; in other areas it is hunted as a gamebird. Perhaps the world should get together on this before this magnificent species goes the way of the dodo.

The cranes were seen June 23, 24 and 25 by Bruce Beecham on Enns Road, Ron



Nature Notes

Christine Scott

Beale of Courtenay and Kathleen Dawson on Ployart Road. Dawson commented that at first, they looked a bit like Emus. Sandhill Cranes do have a bustle of feathers (tertials) on the rump which is very noticeable when standing. They are a close relative of the Whooping Crane and bear some resemblance to the Great Blue Heron.

Father Charles Brandt, Black Creek environmentalist and bird enthusiast, located and filmed the cranes on Sunday, June 25. According to Brandt, it is extremely rare for the cranes to be in this area during the summer months. He has seen them at the UBC Farmlands during spring migration in March and April and occasionally in September.

Cranes mate for life, reinforcing their pair bond each year with an elaborate mating dance. Kathleen Dawson watched in awe as the cranes performed an elaborate performance that includes many quick steps around each other, wings half spread with an occasional leap into the air up to eight feet off the ground. This ceremony also includes bowing toward one another. Although an integral part of their courtship, cranes can be seen dancing throughout the year. Even flightless, non-breeding young (obviously keen on dating) have been seen leaping and flapping at each other.



SANDHILL CRANES: Rare Sandhill Cranes provided plenty of birdwatching excitement last weekend.

Photo by Charles Brandt

One crane was distinctly smaller than the other, but it could not be confirmed that they were a breeding pair; there is no difference in plumage between males and females, and no seasonal variation in plumage either. Monogamous mates and good parents they are; both male and female incubate the eggs and tend the young.

Crane nesting populations in B.C. and elsewhere have suffered seriously due to loss of their wetland habitats. As if human bulldozers weren't vicious enough, migrating cranes have not fared well during summer storms. In 1960, thousands of Sandhill Cranes were killed by hail in New Mexico.

Maj Birch of the Mountaineer Avian Rescue Society in Merville, has seen and heard flocks of Sandhill Cranes overhead during migrations. Birch described their loud, strange trumpeting sounds as having

'almost a guttural quality'. Their travelling call is a loud rattling 'kar-r-r-o-o-o' that can be heard for miles.

These hungry giants dine royally on roots, tubers, seeds, berries, grain, small birds, snakes, lizards, frogs, and crayfish in wet meadows or bogs. In grain-fields, they feast on juicy mice, grasshoppers, earthworms, and crickets.

Do not expect this 14-pound bird to perch as lesser birds do. They spend their lives either in the air or on the ground, as their colossal size and tiny back toe makes perching ludicrous. I shudder to think what might happen if they tried.

In captivity, the oldest Sandhill Crane lived to be 24 years old, but little is known of their life expectancy in the wild. A few pairs still nest in the Burns Bog and Pitt Meadows areas of southern B.C., and on the Queen Charlotte Islands.